



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Kagemusha (The Shadow Warrior) by Akira Kurosawa
Marsha Kinder

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ming into an arc of stars, as lovely as it is in Fellini's sort of way, is nothing compared to Woody's magic tricks. The beautiful long shot of Sandy Bates levitating Daisy on the UFO field, passing a hoop around her suspended body, is a perfect marriage of Fellini and Allen, and it's not going to be laughed at. It's too lyrical. The director's own life is shown fragmented into memories like those jigsaw puzzle pieces with a life of their own that never seem to fit in the big picture. He may be tired of entertaining us and may want to get serious. But if we take *Stardust Memories* seriously, Woody Allen is rejecting us. And that hurts us, as surely as it will eventually ricochet and affect his popularity. When the shit hits the fans, it's time to take the money and rerun.

—KAREN JAEHNE

KAGEMUSHA

(*The Shadow Warrior*) Director: Akira Kurosawa. Script: Kurosawa and Masato Ide. Photography: Takao Saito and Masaharu Ueda. Music: Shinichiro Ikebe. Twentieth Century-Fox.

Kagemusha, The Shadow Warrior. Akira Kurosawa's six-million dollar epic on sixteenth-century Japan, is being widely acclaimed for its historical accuracy, dazzling visual beauty, and exciting battle scenes. From some accounts one would expect an ordinary genre film, only more expensively mounted, more expertly crafted, and on a more colossal scale. Yet not since Jancsó's *The Red and the White* has there been a period war film that is so conceptually bold. The film focuses, not on action as one would expect, but on the process of signification—the crucial role played by the selection and interpretation of signs in shaping the course of history and in creating a work of art.

The opening sequence introduces, not only the main characters and situation through dramatic exposition, but also the semiotic subtext through its brilliant *mise en scène*. Positioned in the center of the screen and facing the camera, Shingen Takeda, the Lord of Kai, sits on a raised platform under an insignia, presumably a symbol of his clan. His position both in the room and in the frame signifies his importance. Although two other men are present, both dressed exactly like Shingen, only the Lord casts a shadow. The signified, surrounded by four signifiers: a symbolic insignia, an indexical shadow, and two human icons who func-

tions as doubles. (Charles Peirce distinguishes three categories of signs: *indexical*, a sign in which meaning is based on an existential bond between the signifier and the signified; *iconic*, a sign that represents its object mainly by physical resemblance; and *symbolic*, a sign that is arbitrary and coded.)

The human doubles in this scene are more ambiguous than the other signs. We learn from the dialogue that one is Shingen's younger brother Nobukado, who is indexically bound by blood and who has been functioning as the Lord's double in battle; we see that he is also iconically linked by physical resemblance and that he too sits on the dais on the right side of Shingen, also facing the camera. The alternate double is Kagemusha, a thief, who is now being presented to Lord Shingen by Nobukado as an interpretant, or replacement for both of them; he humbly sits across from the brothers on the floor with his back to the camera. Within the narrative, Kagemusha is the icon who, after the death of Shingen, emerges as the film's protagonist, fulfilling the Lord's goals, deceiving his enemies, and unifying the clan. The plot affirms that the hero is an icon and that this is the primary source of his power both in the context of human history and in any dramatic narrative. From a more self-reflexive perspective on the film, we realize that the roles of Lord Shingen and Kagemusha are both being represented by the same actor, Tatsuya Nakadai, which establishes an indexical bond between them; we might even wonder whether an additional stand-in is being used in this scene for one of Nakadai's roles. Conversely, the alleged brother Nobukado, who is played by Tsutomu Yamazaki and whose blood relationship is a fiction within the text, is merely an icon. This scene demonstrates that the filmmakers, whose medium combines all three categories of signification, is able to play with his signs—selecting, coding, and manipulating the interpretations of his viewers. This gives him an extraordinary power—one that is analogous to the power of an historical leader like Lord Shingen, who also understands these processes of signification in directing human events.

This focus on signification is maintained throughout the film and developed with great richness and variation on both the visual and audio tracks, and through the unusual development of

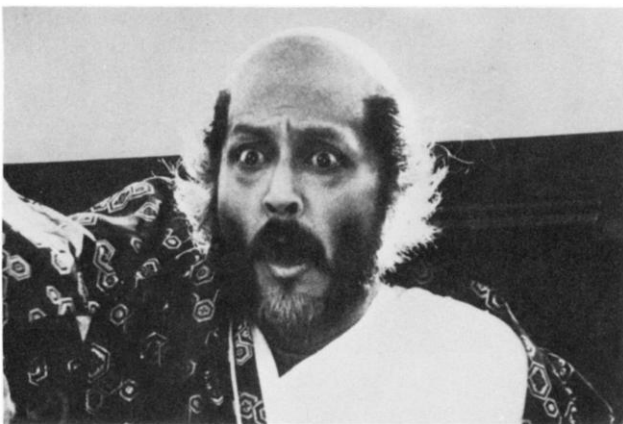
the narrative. In the sequence following the titles, our eyes and ears are directed toward an anonymous messenger, who moves like an arrow from exterior shots to interiors, noisily rushing through silent halls filled with sleeping soldiers, who follow his vigorous movements like a passive audience. The tracking shot accentuates his purposeful motion; both he and the camera urgently seek out the leaders of the clan, who will interpret the news. Instead of opening with the siege of the enemy castle, Kurosawa devotes his first action footage to the process of delivering and decoding a message. This narrative strategy signals that in *Kagemusha* this process will be the primary focus of the action.

This same emphasis also occurs in the death of Lord Shingen. From dramatic exposition we learn that the Takeda clan is laying siege to an enemy castle; the outcome of both the battle and the sequence at first seems to focus on whether the castle will fall. The dialogue informs us that each night someone within the castle plays a flute with great artistry, signifying the power to maintain spirit and control in the face of danger. Assuming that his opponent also knows how to manipulate signs, Shingen comes to believe that if the flute is played again tonight, the castle will not fall. Just as Shingen has his army listen for the flute, Kurosawa directs his audience to focus on the sound track. After a few anxious moments we hear the expected melody, confirming that the castle will not fall, but then we also hear the unexpected—a gunshot ringing out in the darkness. This sign shifts the attention of both the combatants and the audience to the most significant question in the film—is Lord Shingen dead or wounded? The direction in how to listen to the sound track is not limited to this one scene, for throughout the film Kurosawa relies very heavily on audio signs, not only for their traditional functions of accentuating physical gestures and creating emotional tonalities, but also to advance the narrative line and resolve dramatic conflicts.

After being introduced by a sound, the question of Shingen's condition is answered by conflicting visual signs. We see him on horseback, parading before his troops—a sight that heartens his men, and confuses and frightens his enemies. We in the audience soon surmise that this is the debut performance of the Shadow Warrior, an interpreta-

tion which may lead us to conclude (prematurely) that the real Lord is dead. In fact, the figure is still Tatsuya Nakadai, who is neither dead nor wounded. We are reminded of the illusion and artifice both in the story and the medium by the dazzling *mise en scène*. We see the Shadow Warrior, garbed in historically accurate costume, posed against an expressionistic red sky that looks like a rear-projection or painted backdrop. In another shot, a line of samurai with spears pass ceremoniously before a setting sun in the background, creating a human shutter that beams dramatic spokes of light toward the dark silhouette of the Lord in the foreground, as if he were the center of the cosmos. These dramatic visual effects remind us that film is a medium of light and shadow, creating an illusion of motion out of still images.

These illusory scenes are followed by visual demonstrations of Shingen's wounds and eventual death, yet these scenes rely heavily on rhetorical ellipses and cultural codes. As if in a courtroom, we are presented with a scene that indicates precisely how the sniper arranged to shoot Shingen in the dark. At the supposed moment of death, we see the Lord, sallow faced and feeble, rising from his sedan chair and then collapsing; a doctor reads his pulse, drops his hand, and we conclude the Lord is dead. Just as the medical profession has coded the signs of life, the cinematic medium has coded the signs of death. Later we see a large majestic vase being carried in a small boat across a placid lake shrouded in mist. This action is observed both by the generals of the Takeda Clan and by enemy spies, a fact which focuses our attention on interpretation. When the boat re-emerges from the mist, we see that it is empty and conclude with the other observers that the urn carrying



Shingen's body has been thrown into the lake. To subvert this reading of the signs, the generals issue a public proclamation reinterpreting the event as a clan ritual. Despite the fact that we have never seen Shingen's corpse, we reject this explanation as a deceptive move to mislead the rival clans. Yet the generals have been no more deceptive or manipulative than Kurosawa, who demonstrates how minimal signs can be the basis of certainty about historical matters of life and death. Were there any fewer ellipses in the signs concerning the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jesus Christ, or any other iconic hero from the past? Will we ever know for certain who killed Kennedy or what really happened in Vietnam, or in any other war? We experienced these historical events through verbal and visual signs that were filtered through our cultural institutions and mass media. *Kagemusha* suggests that all historical accounts, including a samurai saga, are based on the reading of signs.

This idea is developed in the climactic battle sequence, which Kurosawa handles in an extremely bold way. Despite the fact that this is the most expensive Japanese epic ever made, he shows amazing restraint in depicting actual violence, particularly in contrast to his earlier period pieces. Although some of his previous samurai films, such as *Yojimbo* and *Throne of Blood*, also emphasize the reading of signs and alternate between action and interpretation, they still contain many graphic scenes of violence.¹ For the first time in *Kagemusha*, Kurosawa seems to be exploring how little can be shown of a battle while still having it signify what happens with great emotional impact.² His choices are stylized and effective; they evoke the Japanese aesthetic of minimalism and understatement. The single resonant image as in haiku. The single physical gesture punctuated by stillness as in Kabuki theater. Before the battle, we are explicitly told that the Takeda generals must know what the moves of the enemy mean, but by the time they interpret the signs it may be too late to act. We are also told the enemy's strategy—to first shoot the horses since traditionally the Takeda Clan have not been able to fight on foot. We also learn that the Takeda Clan intend to change their strategy—for the first time Lord Shingen or his icon will *not* be seated behind them, like a mountain, embodying their traditional stability; for the first time they

will be led by his son who will take the offense. This advanced information provides a context that shapes, not only the way each side reads the moves of its opponents, but also the way the audience watches and interprets the minimal signs of battle. The camera pans across a line of soldiers firing sequentially through slatted beams, evoking the earlier scene at the debut of the Shadow Warrior. As we hear the violent sounds of war, we scan the faces of the generals and of the thief Kagemusha who are observing the battle, reading defeat in their grimaces and in their eyes. When we actually see the battlefield, the war is over. We perceive only the bloody aftermath—the corpses twisted into contorted postures, the twitching hooves of dying horses. The final image is of Kagemusha being mortally wounded and running toward the lake where Lord Shingen was earlier buried; the corpse of the Shadow Warrior floats on the water, drifting toward the banner of the Takeda Clan. The icon and the symbol are united and manifest on the surface, while the original lies latent in the depths below.

It is significant that the final image is of Kagemusha. Although we had earlier been told, "when the original is dead, the double has no meaning," the Shadow Warrior has been permanently transformed by his identification with Shingen. The Lord has become part of his living memory, altering his values, consciousness, and behavior, and appearing as a vivid image in his dreams. This transformation is dramatized quite wittily in one scene where Kagemusha sits before an audience who is aware of his disguise, imitating Shingen's gesture of stroking his mustache, winking at his acting coach Nobukado, and evoking tears and looks of astonishment in his admiring observers. We in the film audience simultaneously judge his performance; but since we are aware of the double deception, we realize that Nakadai is merely impersonating himself. The self-reflexiveness of his performance is underscored by the inclusion of a brief inset theater scene and by the line that accompanies the discovery of his true identity, "The play is over!"

Just as Freud suggested that jokes frequently are based on the same latent content as child's play, fantasies, and dreams, we find that one of the few jokes in *Kagemusha* reveals the same semiotic subtext. Before the Shadow Warrior first

arrives at the Lord's castle where his performance will receive its second major test, two attendants literally try to clear the path of all signs of previous traffic, but keep marking the surface with their own footprints. The humor depends on the futility of trying to erase the signs of one's own identity and past experience—a premise that foreshadows the ultimate failure of Kagemusha's impersonation.

It is precisely when Kagemusha is forced to resume his persona as thief that Shingen's influence on him receives its harshest test. We see that the Shadow Warrior has internalized the role: he has grown to love the heir; has come to feel a fierce loyalty to the clan, even though its members now reject him; and no longer wants to renounce his identification with the Lord. In the climactic battle that follows, he is even willing to sacrifice his life. The Shadow has become a man of substance; the iconic bond has grown indexical. Kagemusha dies serving his Lord, and in this sense Shingen's spirit is still alive within him, giving his final action meaning. From this perspective, the entire film could be read as religious allegory, which would lead us to assign new significance to certain details—e.g., Kagemusha had been saved from crucifixion to embody the Lord; in an earlier battle when representing the symbolic role of the Mountain, he was told, "Stand still as if you were crucified."

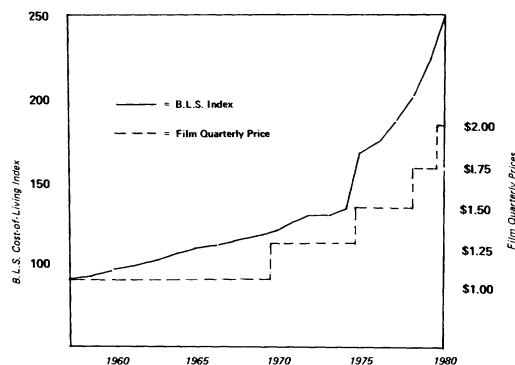
Lord Shingen's life-after-death is evoked, not only in religious terms, but also on the more general level of human civilization. It is the creation and manipulation of signs that has allowed humans to transcend the mortality of the individual, to pass on what they know to the next generation, and to insure the survival of the species. Even after his death, Lord Shingen's will directs the destiny of the clan, for it is woven into the cultural tradition and is respected by the generals who support the power of his icon. While the clan shows respect for Nature, they always transform it into symbols. For example, the four main armies are named after natural forces that represent change (Fire and Wind) and stability (Forest and Mountain). Such a heavy reliance on signs leads to the valuing of learning over instinct, culture over nature—choices that distinguish humans from other animals. Carl Sagan speculates in *Dragons of Eden*: "Much of the history of life since the carboniferous Period can be described as the gradual (and cer-

tainly incomplete) dominance of brains over genes."³ The film dramatizes this shift in dominance. Kagemusha is accepted as icon by everyone—with two exceptions. Only Lord Shingen's horse and his young grandson/heir instinctively know he's an impostor. The horse remains committed to his instincts and ultimately reveals the deception, but the child is programmed to reinterpret his intuition: he concludes that he no longer fears his grandfather, attributing the difference to his own human potential for learning and maturation.

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Shingen's enemies, the Lords of the two rival clans, exhibit the same tendencies. Both instinctively "feel" Shingen is dead, yet they reinterpret this feeling as their own strong desire for his death. In other words, they see it as a wish fulfillment, as if they were interpreting a dream. When one of the Lords finally learns that Shingen has been dead for three years, he performs a strange ritualistic dance, chanting "Life is a dream, a vision." As in the case of the grandson, their interpretation is not wrong; it is merely partial. Like dreams, these intuitive signs in humans are overdetermined. The evolutionary development in mammals of dreaming sleep helped to further the dominance of brains over genes. As the dreaming mechanisms grew increasingly complex in humans, the brain developed new ways of processing sensory images from the past and generating new combinations of signs for directing the future.

Both the human power of interpreting signs and the surviving influence of Lord Shingen are vividly demonstrated in *Kagemusha's* nightmare. It occurs shortly after Shingen's death and while Kagemusha is still resisting his role as double. In the dream we see Kagemusha against a vivid multi-colored sky, walking through stylized waves whose substance is dust rather than water. Suddenly Lord Shingen materializes, and Kagemusha rushes back and forth in desperation. The final image is a close-up of Kagemusha's feet submerged in water. When he awakens from the nightmare, he says: "I was surrounded by thousands of enemies." Although we did not see any enemies in the dream, we conclude that he sensed their presence and that's why he was running. At this point in the film, we might see the nightmare as a reflection of his debut performance as Shadow Warrior, in which he was surrounded by soldiers; the expressionistic visuals link the two sequences. Such an interpretation might lead us to conclude that Lord Shingen has now become Kagemusha's Shadow. By the time we reach the end of the film, we realize the dream was prophetic. Both the visual images and the verbal commentary foreshadow the climactic battle in which Kagemusha is surrounded by thousands of enemies, and in which he joins his Lord in a watery grave. The prophetic nature of the dream is also underlined by the mysterious rainbow that appears in the sky just before the battle. Not only does it evoke the multi-

colored sky in *Kagemusha's* nightmare, but the Takeda Clan generals explicitly interpret it as a sign of Lord Shingen's presence and as a warning against their offensive strategy. Just as the scene with the flute taught us how to listen to the sound track, this rainbow scene instructs us in how to interpret expressionistic colors and lighting effects throughout the rest of the film. It may lead us to reinterpret Lord Shingen's role in the nightmare—not merely as Kagemusha's Shadow or as a prophecy of the Shadow Warrior's coming death, but to indicate the survival of the Lord's spirit and his continuing influence over the way his clan interprets human experience. One instinctively feels, if only Kagemusha had understood the dream, perhaps he could have prevented the defeat of the Takeda Clan. But then we recall the words of the generals on the eve of battle: "By the time we interpret the moves of the enemy, it may be too late to act."

The same may be true of dreams. Yet unlike battles, dreams contain only the images of action, not the actions themselves. The same is true of both movies and history. *Kagemusha* emphasizes this distinction, for it is an historical reconstruction that foregrounds, not even the *images of actions*, but the human process of interpreting them.

—MARSHA KINDER

NOTES

1. For a discussion of this pattern in *Throne of Blood*, see my article entitled "Throne of Blood: a Morality Dance," *Literature/Film Quarterly* (October 1977), 339–45.

2. I realize I am taking a risk in making this claim since 20 minutes have been cut from the American version of the film and I have not seen the original.

3. New York: Ballantine Books, 1978, p. 49.

RIGHT OUT OF HISTORY

Director and Editor: Johanna Demetrakas. Photography: Baird Bryant. Producer: Thom Tyson. Phoenix Films.

Right Out of History is a feature-length documentary about the making of "The Dinner Party," an art piece conceived by Judy Chicago and worked on by hundreds of people. It is the extraordinary accomplishment of this film that, gently and with subtle wit that enriches the exceptionally high quality of its camerawork and editing, it succeeds